

**Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
Prepared Statement**

By way of introduction, I am FG Dowden and I currently serve as the Regional Liaison for the New Orleans Department of Homeland Security and Public Safety. In this position I represent the city and I have worked for the last two years to develop and execute communications interoperability projects and issues with St. Bernard, Plaquemines and Jefferson Parishes which, along with New Orleans, make up Louisiana Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI), Region 1. I want to thank you for the invitation to testify before the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and the opportunity to assist your committee and the nation in improving our capability for communications interoperability in response to catastrophic events. Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster that destroyed or damaged our communications infrastructure and made it extremely difficult and, in some cases, impossible to react and to coordinate the massive response and recovery effort brought on by the storm. Thousands of lives and property were put at risk because of the extensive damage and losses to the communication systems that were in use by various agencies within the respective parishes. The ability to communicate with state and federal agencies, in most cases, was limited to a few land lines, satellite phones and data links. Today I would like to provide you with information relative to the challenges to communications and communications interoperability prior to and during the storm and a status on where we are as we move forward.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, we had over seventy first responder agencies operating over myriad disparate voice radio communications systems within the region. The two-

way radio spectrum ranged from your very basic simplex radios, to more advanced VHF and 400 MHz systems, to the more modern and sophisticated 800 MHz trunked radio systems. Two parishes were operating systems that had far exceeded their normal service life and which challenged the best radio technicians to keep them operational on a daily basis. Day to day operability was challenging to say the least. Additionally, within those two parishes they were operating on several different types of proprietary systems which in many cases could not communicate with each other. The other two parishes were operating more modern and technically sophisticated 800 MHz trunked digital or analog systems. In the case of New Orleans, the city 800 MHz network supported police, fire, emergency medical services and the Office of Emergency Preparedness over a common shared system. Jefferson Parish was supported by two 800 MHz trunked radio systems, one of which supported the parish government and the other the sheriff's department. The state agencies were operating on a different 800 MHz trunked analog system and federal agencies were operating on VHF spectrum and other radio systems, depending on the agency. As you can see, in addition to the day to day operational issues, communications interoperability was extremely problematic. Recognizing these problems, New Orleans and Jefferson law enforcement had put in place console patches connecting their 800 MHz controllers and this provided some level of interoperability. Local agencies in coordination with federal agencies and with support from a Public Service Wireless Network project had used bridging technology in the form of ACU 1000's to connect disparate radios from seventeen local, state and federal agencies and provide interoperability. Recognizing the interoperability problems, the City of New Orleans had applied for and received a Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grant which,

with the local cash match, totaled \$7.3 million dollars. The grant would provide the basis for improving day to day operability within each parish and improve interoperability within the region. We were sixteen months away from the completion of the project when we were struck by Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, working in coordination with the Interoperable Communications Technical Assistance Program (ICTAP) provided by the Department of Homeland Security, we had begun the effort of aligning our regional operating procedures and protocols through the completion of a Regional Tactical Interoperable Communications Plan and in late June had conducted a tabletop exercise as part of the validation process for that plan. A follow on exercise was scheduled for late September; however, that exercise was preempted by Hurricane Katrina.

Before moving on to address the impact of Hurricane Katrina on voice communications, I would like to briefly address funding issues related to public safety or first responder communications systems. In conjunction with the development of the application for the COPS Grant, the Region analyzed options for creating a region wide, shared 800 MHz trunked digital system in support of where it was thought that the Region should go in order to achieve the highest order of operability and interoperability. The cost estimates ranged as high as \$45 million and it was viewed as cost prohibitive; therefore, a plan was developed that would move us to a region wide shared system in a phased approach over time. The plan moved St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes onto the Jefferson Parish law enforcement system, which would be upgraded to a dual mode P25 compliant 700 / 800 MHZ system and then link the Jefferson and New Orleans systems together through an interoperability switch. The expectation was that, as additional funds became available through additional COPS or UASI grants, New

Orleans could migrate to a dual mode P25 compliant system and then further link the Region to the state. The point here is that, even in ordinary times, most agencies who operate on the margin from a fiscal standpoint, can not afford to invest in a modern technically advanced voice radio communications system without significant federal grant support. After a catastrophic event such as Hurricane Katrina, local governments are faced with even greater financial challenges and must rely even more on outside funding and “no cost” outside assistance for some project management, technical and engineering support such as that provided by the ICTAP program provided by the Department of Homeland Security.

Hurricane Katrina had a devastating impact on the communications infrastructure in the four parishes making up Region 1. In St. Bernard Parish the extreme winds took away communications towers and antennas, and flood waters inundated the 911 center and forced the evacuation of buildings housing communications for the Fire and Sheriff’s Departments. All voice radio communications were lost except for very limited radio to radio communications. In Plaquemines Parish, the parish government communications tower and communications center along with their microwave antennas were lost. The Plaquemines Sheriff lost the 911 communications and dispatch center and all towers. In short, all agencies in Plaquemines Parish lost all communications and it was almost three weeks before they had any means of voice communications. The Jefferson Parish Sheriff’s office lost the main tower supporting their communication system and suffered damage to other sites throughout their system. Today antennas supporting their communications center are still temporarily located on the 400 foot boom of a crane. During and in the aftermath of the storm, the Region’s only means of voice radio

communications was the use of five or fewer mutual aid channels. In New Orleans, one tower was inundated by the storm surge and remains inoperable, two towers had equipment damaged or lost power because of flood waters, and the 911 centers and police, fire, and EMS dispatch centers were all impacted and rendered unusable by flood waters. The City also was forced to rely on a limited number of mutual aid channels. The ACU 1000 interoperability switch which was located with the fire department had to be abandoned because of the flood waters, therefore the interoperability between the four parishes and state and federal agencies was lost. It also needs to be stated and clearly understood that the communications failures were a result of catastrophic physical damage or loss as a result of the extremely high winds, storm surge and flooding and not the result of actual system failures, even in the older systems.

As you have heard, the impact of Hurricane Katrina was severe and it has left the Region scrambling to restore communications before the next hurricane season, which is only five months away. The repair or replacement of infrastructure such as communications towers that were damaged by the storm and rightfully eligible for replacement and reimbursement by FEMA has languished. Some efforts at the state or federal levels have complicated the effort to restore capability and interoperability. We, as a region, totally understand the implications of entering this next storm season without our communications systems fully operational and we are currently working on two parallel efforts to restore our communications. The first is to patch together what we have left, what has been provided by FEMA and what equipment we can purchase immediately and reuse in the future. This temporary solution will support all of the agencies in the Region and will provide interoperability and redundancy to the fullest

extent possible. This will not be optimum but we can at least communicate before the next storm season. The second is to pursue our regional plan and install a dual mode 700/800 MHz fully P25 compliant system, comprised of all first responders in our four parish region, on one shared radio system, connected to the State of Louisiana 700 MHz system by the end of the year. To augment the COPS Grant, we have committed all available UASI funds and, as much as possible, we are taking advantage of FEMA funding; however, we still need approximately \$22 million for the purchase of subscriber radios for New Orleans and Jefferson Parish, in order to complete the project. Without the additional funding, we will not be able to complete the project and will continue to have interoperability problems. Thank you very much Madam Chairman and Committee members.